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IMPACT OF ASKING RACE INFORMATION IN MAIL
SURVEYS

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ABSTRACT

A field experiment was carried out in four geographical areas of the country to measure any response bias which may arise by asking the respondents to provide information on their racial or ethnic background. The total sample of 1200 respondents was randomly split into test and control groups. Both were sent a mail questionnaire with identical procedures and content except the test group was asked at the end, to also provide race information.

There were virtually no differences in both the degree of cooperation as measured by response rate and in the quality of information provided with respect to other questions. Furthermore, race information was found to be less personal or threatening than income information because non-response was only 4 percent to race question as compared to ten percent for income question.

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Surprisingly, there is very little empirical research on impact of asking race information in a mail survey (Potter, et al., 1972). Furthermore, there are only a handful of studies in all areas of survey research in general which discuss or measure any type of response effects that could be attributed to race as a demographic characteristic. Most of these studies, however, deal with measurement of response effects attributable to the race of the respondent, the race of the interviewer, or their interaction process (Sudman and Bradburn, 1974). Most of these studies are limited to personal interviews, and are clearly a consequence of the classic work in the area by Hyman (1954) and Katz (1942). None of these studies, however, measure the impact of asking race information regardless of whether the respondent is black or white. Even in mail surveys, more research exists on the impact of asking other demographic information such as age, sex and especially income.

There can be several explanations for the lack of empirical research on the impact of asking race information. First, most researchers might have presumed that race is a much more sensitive demographic information which will generate both noncooperation and biased answers in a mail survey.

Second, researchers might have presumed that asking race information from a respondent may be illegal or at least may have legal implications to the detriment of the researcher. Finally, since personal interviews have dominated as a survey technique until recently, there was no need to ask race information as the interviewer can easily assess it without asking it.

However, gathering information about the race of the respondent is very important in survey research for several reasons. First, race as a demographic variable is as fundamental and influential as age and sex are in determining both the life styles and consumption styles of people (Sheth, 1977). Second, many ethnic subcultures in the U.S. are large enough in size to warrant special attention and to treat them as unique segments with special wants and needs from a public policy and commercial practice viewpoints. Finally, the switch to telephone interviewing and mail surveys as methods of data collection in survey research has necessitated asking for race information since it cannot be observed in mail surveys.

STUDY DESIGN

A research study was, therefore, planned to measure the impact of asking race information in terms of response rate or the degree of cooperation. This study was part of a larger market research program at A.T.&T. Company which consists of maintaining a national longitudinal panel of about 30,000 residential telephone customers. These customers are surveyed every two to three years by a mail survey in which they are asked to provide household demographic information as well as their

perceptions and attitudes toward telephone services. The national panel is drawn from nearly one hundred geographical areas of the U.S. which represents the Bell System territory of telecommunication services.

Since prior research has found significant regional differences with respect to both demographics as well as telephone services among Bell System residential customers, it was decided that the impact of asking race information should be measured at both regional and national level. Accordingly, four geographical markets were chosen, each representing a region of the country. The choice of the specific market was partly based on cluster analysis of all markets within a region, and partly on the degree of cooperation which could be obtained from the local Bell operating telephone companies. The four markets chosen for the study essentially represented the northern, southwestern, eastern, and western areas of the U.S.

In each chosen market, a random sample of 300 telephone customers was selected. Each random sample was then further subdivided into two groups defined as control and test groups. Thus, at a national level, the total sample consisted of 1,200 telephone customers split into the two subgroups (control and test) of 600 customers each.

The questionnaire was identical between the control and test subgroups except that the latter was asked to provide race information on a check list question. The race information question was part of a broader question in which the respondent was asked to describe himself or herself with respect to age, sex, relationship to head of household, and ethnic background. The question was placed at the end of the questionnaire and was preceded by family income question.

The exact content and format of the question is reproduced below:

Please describe yourself.

<u>Age</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Relationship to Head of Household</u>	<u>Ethnic Background</u>
____ yrs.	[] Male		White []
	[] Female		Black []
			Spanish speaking []
			Oriental []
			Other []

In the control subgroups, the same format was used but without asking the race information.

The full questionnaire was six pages long and consisted of four separate sections. The first section contained several interest-arrousing questions about the telephone services. The second section contained questions related to the respondent's home (type and size of home, own or rent, and length of residence). The third section consisted of questions related to the telephone services (number and type of telephones, usage of phone and calling patterns). The final section asked the respondent to describe household demographics such as the age, sex, marital status, education and occupation of Household Head, family income, and personal characteristics as described above.

The mailing and follow-up procedures utilized in the study were developed from an earlier study (Roscoe, Lang, and Sheth, 1975). It consisted of mailing the questionnaire with a personal cover letter written by the local telephone manager and followed up by a telephone reminder and a second mailing to those who did not respond within a prespecified time interval. The questionnaire was addressed to the subscriber in whose name the telephone was listed. The cover letter asked that the head of household should fill

it out, and only in the case he cannot, should it be filled out by another adult person in the household.

All the questionnaires were collected and tabulated if they were returned in a prepaid envelope and arrived at the office within two weeks of the final deadline date.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The response rates from each of the four markets and for each of the two subgroups (control and test) are summarized in Table 1. The results

Insert Table 1 about here.

clearly indicate that there was virtually no impact of asking race information on the response rate. At the aggregate level, both control and test groups had a total response rate of 75 percent returns.

There are, however, some regional differences between control and test groups especially in areas two and three. In area two (Northern U.S.), the test group produced a total response rate of only 76 percent as compared to 83 percent in the control group. On the other hand, we got just the opposite results in region three (Southwest U.S.). The test group produced a total response rate of 69 percent as compared to only 63 percent in the control group. Since neither of these differences is substantial, it is concluded that asking race information produced neither positive nor negative effects on the response rate.

To insure that other factors are not suppressing any potential impact of asking race information, the total response rate was partitioned into

(1) those which could not be delivered to the respondent, (2) those which were not usable due to only partial completion of the questionnaire, and (3) those which were deemed as good returns suitable for statistical analysis. These breakdowns are also provided in Table 1. They also indicate that there were no substantial differences in receiving the mail survey or in the quality of responses to negate the conclusions that asking race information produces no effect on response rate.

At this point, it is worth noting that the response rate varies much more as a function of the region of the country than as a function of asking race information. For example, the range across regions in both control and test groups combined is from a low of 63 percent in area three to a high of 81 percent (18 percentage points) in area one with respect to good and valid returns. However, the range of difference in response rate between control and test groups is from a low of zero percent in area one to a high of 5 percent in area two (5 percentage points spread). This finding of greater variability in response rates across regions of the country is in line with a previous study on the same population by Sheth and Roscoe (1975).

We also analyzed responses to several other demographic questions which are considered sensitive or threatening to the respondent in order to compare their refusal and no answer patterns with those for the race question. The results are summarized in Table 2 at the aggregate level for both the control and test groups. In both the groups, the highest

Insert Table 2 about here.

refusal rate is for the income question, and it is virtually the same

indicating comparability of the test and control groups. The refusal rate for the race question is only 4.4 percent in the test group where it was included. Finally, the refusal rates in both control and test groups are very low for other sensitive questions related to age, sex, and respondent's relationship to the Household Head.

This finding forces us to conclude that asking race information is not as sensitive an issue as researchers, in general, fear it to be. It is decidedly less threatening to the respondent than asking income information.

Finally, we examined those respondents in the test group who had refused to answer the race question to see whether their refusal was motivated by the specific piece of information we had asked or whether it was part of a general refusal syndrome. This was accomplished by cross-tabulating refusals responses to the race questions with those to other personal demographic questions. We found that four out of five who refused to answer the sex question also refused to answer the race question (80 percent). Similarly, six out of seven persons who refused to provide information on the relationship to Household Head also refused to provide the race information (86 percent). This would suggest that those who refused to provide race information have a more general refusal syndrome. In other words, there is a very small minority of respondents (less than five percent) who like to cooperate in a mail survey but wish not to be identified on the basis of sex, age, relationship to Household Head, and race.

In summary, this study indicates that there is no impact of asking race information on the overall response rate in a mail survey. Second, income is a much more sensitive or threatening question than race is. Finally, those respondents who cooperate in the survey but refuse to answer the race question do so more due to a general refusal syndrome than due to the sensitivity of race information.

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TABLE 1

RESPONSE RATES IN CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS

		Control Groups (n=600) (Absence of Race Question)				Test Groups (n=600) (Presence of Race Question)			
		Area	Area	Area	Total	Area	Area	Area	Area
		One	Two	Three	Four	One	Two	Three	Four
		(150)	(150)	(150)	(150)	(600)	(150)	(150)	(150)
Good Returns		122 (81%)	118 (79%)	91 (61%)	101 (67%)	432 (72%)	431 (81%)	121 (74%)	111 (65%)
P. O. Returns		2	2	1	7	12	11	1	1
Not Usable		1	4	2	1	8	7	-	2
Total Response	Rate	125 (83%)	125 (83%)	94 (63%)	109 (73%)	452 (75%)	449 (75%)	122 (82%)	114 (76%)
								103 (69%)	110 (73%)

TABLE 2
REFUSAL TO ANSWER PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS QUESTIONS

	Control (n=432)	Test (n=431)
Income	39 (9.1%)	45 (10.4%)
Race	(Not Asked)	19 (4.4%)
Age	8 (1.9%)	9 (2%)
Relationship to Head of Household	2 (0.5%)	7 (1.6%)
Sex	--	5 (1.2%)





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